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ABSTRACT

As a world community, Indigenous peoples are faced with many common challenges in their attempts to maintain the vitality of their respective languages and to honor the "natural order of the Creator." Ten strategies are discussed that are critical to the task of renewing and maintaining Indigenous languages. These strategies are: (1) banking Indigenous languages by immediately recording elders and other fluent speakers on audiotape, videotape, or CD-ROM; (2) raising the consciousness of Aboriginal peoples about the history of their oppression and the importance of language to culture, world view, identity, and spirituality; (3) mobilizing human resources and raising money; (4) developing a full spectrum of language training and certification for language teachers, linguists, and others; (5) developing a comprehensive and appropriate curriculum to recreate the intergenerational transmission process in school and community programs; (6) engaging in meaningful research about effective models of language renewal and the nature of language learning; (7) informing national public opinion to create empathy and support; (8) eliminating artificial geographic boundaries and focusing on language families; (9) advocating for Aboriginal language legislation; and (10) working together on family, community, and national levels. (Contains 12 references.) (SV)

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ED 462 233

The Preservation and Use of Our Languages: Respecting the Natural Order of the Creator

Verna J. Kirkness

The importance of language as an expression of culture, of who we are as a people, must be upheld by each individual, each family, each community, and each nation. As Fishman (1996) states, language is the mind, spirit, and soul of a people. Every effort must be made to protect, preserve, promote, and practice our Indigenous/Aboriginal languages. We must gather into the circle all the knowledge, wisdom, and energy we possess to ensure their survival.

Over the last thirty years, various programs and projects have been initiated in an attempt to keep our languages alive. We must especially recognize and thank our Elders and language teachers for their perseverance in efforts to save our languages despite the lack of support given to them.

As a world community of Indigenous people, we are faced with many common challenges in our attempts to maintain the vitality of our respective languages and to honour "the natural order of the Creator." But in the end, the preservation and use of our languages depends on our communities: "When the smallest of our communities hangs on to their language.... [it] allows your community to continue and to redevelop and recreate itself...[as it links] one generation to the next" (D. Crombie as quoted in Kirkness, 1989, p. 26). The challenge we face today is to ensure that the work at all levels to protect and preserve our languages is being done to provide for the specific needs of the communities. The following are ten directions that I consider to be critical to the task:

1. We Must Bank Our Languages.

To save what remains of our languages, it is crucial that we preserve them immediately by recording on audiotape, videotape, or CD-ROM all of our fluent speakers, most of whom are our Elders. We must capture the purest oral forms of our languages to ensure that they will be available to future generations. Although today it may not be important to many of our people to speak their ancestral language, when the "wake-up" call does come, as I am sure it will, the languages that we "bank" now will make possible a new period of cultural renaissance among our people. In fact, the very act of recording our languages may produce the spark that inspires the community to begin the process of language revival and maintenance.

At the current rate of decline, only four of our original 60 Aboriginal languages in Canada have a reasonable chance of surviving the next century. Cree, Ojibwa, Inuktitut, and Dakota are the languages predicted to survive (University of British Columbia, 1996). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) reported that Cree speakers make up 43% of all those with an Aboriginal mother tongue. Although this may simply be a reflection of the population, it nonetheless presents a frightening picture of the remaining Aboriginal languages.

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For those of us who are Cree, it is difficult to take any great comfort in this fact as we experience our own loss of fluency in the language and hear fewer and fewer of the younger generation speaking the Cree language. The RCAP also states that five of our languages have already become extinct and six more are near extinction (Haida, Kutenai, Tsimshian, Tlingit, most Salishan and Wakashan languages).

2. We Must Raise the Consciousness Level of Our People.

To save our languages, there is a need to ensure that our people know why our languages are nearing extinction and why our languages are so important to our lives and to who we are. To do this, we can employ two strategies.

First, we must do as Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilian educator who spent a lifetime working with the oppressed in South America and Africa, has done. We must ensure that every Aboriginal man, woman, and child knows of their oppression. They must know how the oppressors "stole" their language and culture through schooling in residential schools and day schools, how the Indian Act has destroyed their identity, and how all this has contributed to the weakening of Our People and their communities: "Only through knowing can the oppressed recognize the ideological distortions that influence and shape their understanding of social and political reality" (Freire, 1978). The impact of years of brainwashing must be revealed and understood.

Second, we must ensure that every Aboriginal man, woman, and child knows the effect language has on their lives. Language is what gives us our identity and expresses our unique worldview. Language is the ultimate symbol of belonging; it is through language that culture is shared and transmitted. If we lose our language, we are essentially losing a way of life, a way of thought, a way of valuing and a particular human reality. If you take language "away from the culture, you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers" (Fishman, 1996, p. 81).

Without our Aboriginal languages, we are not remaining true to "the natural order of the Creator." At the 1988 Aboriginal Language Policy Conference, Grand Chief Mike Mitchell related the following words of his grandfather:

> What would happen to the Creator's law if the robin couldn't sing its song anymore? We would feel very bad: We would understand that something snapped in nature's law. What would happen if you saw a robin and you heard a different song, if it was singing the song of the sea gull? You would say, "Robin, that's not your language; that's not your song."

To this Chief Mitchell added: "It was not meant for us to lose our language; we broke the cycle, and today we have nothing to stand on if our language is going to die."

3. We Must Mobilize Our Resources.

The most important and valuable resources we have to save our languages today are our human resources. Our speakers of the language, whether totally or marginally fluent, are the key to enabling us to maintain the "Creator's natural order."

As Timoti Karetu, the New Zealand Maori Language Commissioner, states: "The revitalization of a language is dependent upon the will of its speakers." To set up a language bank, for instance, it will take speakers who may not consider themselves to be fluent, but who have sufficient command of the language, to interview the more fluent speakers. The onus and responsibility falls on the youngest generation of speakers who have the education, vitality, and stamina to pursue the range of activity that is needed to save our languages. Ways and means must be identified that enable them to play an active role in revitalizing our languages.

The other critical resource needed is money. While not all initiatives require money, many do. We must get the government and the churches to acknowledge their responsibility in the demise of our languages and get them to provide the financial resources required to enable us to save our languages. As monies become available, Aboriginal people with language expertise and a passion for language renewal must have a voice in organizing a plan of action that will be of benefit to all language groups.

4. We Must Provide Training and Certification.

To save our languages, we must have appropriate, certified training programs available to enable our people to become language teachers, linguists, interpreters, translators, curriculum developers, and researchers.

It is not sufficient just to have language training workshops or short courses. It is not sufficient just to have isolated courses provided by various colleges or universities. Even a range of courses offered in a Native Studies, education, or other degree is not sufficient. What is required is a full scale training program leading to a certificate, degree, or diploma in Indigenous/Aboriginal languages or, even better, in a particular language or language family. Building in "prior learning assessment" will give the fluent speakers an advantage. As the Maori of New Zealand are doing, our own qualification boards should be established to provide guidelines for standards to be obtained in the various categories. If articulation with institutions of higher learning is desired, the qualification boards can be affiliated with the provincial or territorial certification authorities.

The training of teachers to teach the language, through either immersion or as a second language, requires particular skills. Current approaches are basically ineffective because they are based on the old grammar teaching methods used to teach English, which is the only model available to many of our fluent speakers. Of greatest importance is the need to identify "best practice pedagogy" based on the traditions of our people.

5. We Must Develop a Comprehensive and Appropriate Curriculum.

Curriculum development is necessary if we are to be successful in recreating an intergenerational transmission process. It is only through passing on the language from parent to child that our languages can truly survive. If two successive generations do not speak the language, it will be lost; we need a planned intervention. A community approach to developing language curriculum would be the most effective way to ensure that there is an opportunity for everyone to get involved in learning the language. It cannot be left up to the schools; it must be a family and community responsibility.

To teach our languages effectively, planning is critical. In the case of planning language programs community-wide, it is important that an overall plan be prepared that would encompass preschool through to adult learning in both formal institutions (schools) and community programs. This will ensure that learning is continuous and will avoid unnecessary duplication.

The community must take the lead and be actively involved in planning and implementing language programs. Only the people of the community can put a plan into the appropriate contextual framework. The plan must be based on the philosophy of the people, and the goals must be clearly articulated by them. For example, is the goal to be able to converse in the language? Is it to attain literacy? How will this be accomplished stage by stage? Who will be the teachers? What materials will be required? What teaching methods will be employed? How will progress be assessed?

6. We Must Engage in Meaningful Research.

The purpose of research is to find answers to questions, and researching important questions may well be the most critical area to be addressed if we are to save our languages. The most urgent questions needing research pertain to the creation of successful and effective models of language renewal.

In an article entitled "At a Loss for Words," Stephen Hume (1998) asks two important questions: "Why were the Hungarians able to preserve their language for over 5,000 years despite repeated reinvention of their original culture and social structure...? Why is Welsh undergoing an explosive renaissance among teenagers and young adults?" Researching the answers to these two questions would provide us with a wealth of understanding and direction in addressing our situation.

Other languages that have successfully been rescued from near extinction are Hebrew in Israel, Catlan in Spain, and Maori in New Zealand. Learning about the processes they used to revive their languages would answer a number of our questions. This information is critical to curriculum development, teaching methodology, training and certification of teachers and other language professionals, and to our understanding of language acquisition.

We really know very little about our languages. Little is known about how English or French are learned, and less is known about how Indigenous languages are learned. Will knowledge of our traditions help us to understand how we learn? We talk about building on cultural traditions, yet little research has

been done in this area. Carl Urion and Walter Lightning suggest that traditions cannot be written down (Urion, Norton, & Porter, 1995). Does this suggest an oral approach to research? This is an exciting possibility.

We have to get inside our language for deeper meaning. As Earle Claxton states, quoted in Hume's (1998) article, "The more you get into language, the more you get to the very heart of the culture and spirit." Learning how words and sentences are constructed gives us information about our culture, our way of thinking. Learning how our stories were told, how knowledge was imparted, sheds light on who we are as a people. How often have we said, "It is difficult to translate this into English"? This tells us that there is a uniqueness to our language. Only by expanding our knowledge of our languages can we begin a meaningful process of language revival and preservation.

7. We Must Inform Public Opinion.

Canadian society as a whole must be informed about the state of our languages. Articles, such as the one by Stephen Hume in *The Vancouver Sun*, must appear in all forms of media. Although non-Aboriginal advocates write articles and books and give interviews, there is a need for us, as Indigenous/Aboriginal people, to do more to promote an understanding of the state of our languages to the general public. We too could publish articles in magazines and newspapers and take advantage of radio or television talk shows to get our message out.

Public opinion is important in gaining government support. The more understanding there is about the critical state of our languages, the reasons for our predicament, and our efforts to save our languages, the greater the empathy will be for our situation.

8. We Must Eliminate Artificial Boundaries.

When it comes to saving our languages, we must use a "natural order of the Creator" approach. That is, we must not acknowledge artificial boundaries that have no significance to language. Basing Aboriginal language policy within provincial boundaries makes little sense when Cree is spoken in at least six provinces and when Sioux is spoken in at least two provinces and in the United States. Working within these boundaries creates a duplication of effort and resources. In the case of British Columbia, the boundary between Canada and Alaska should be disregarded because both places share common languages.

We must also avoid using the political boundaries established by our national Aboriginal organizations. For example, the Assembly of First Nations, the Metis National Council, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and the Native Women's Association of Canada, along with their provincial and territorial affiliates, all represent Cree speakers. Again, as in the case of provincial and territorial boundaries, there is a duplication of effort and resources.

The "natural order of the Creator" suggests that we should use the eleven language families that have been identified as a starting point. Surely, the family should make decisions about its future. Just as in the real world, the language

families vary in size with Algonkian and Athapaskan being the largest and the six language families in British Columbia being the smallest. The large families may well subdivide, but only after the family has had an opportunity to assess its situation. This approach to saving our languages would ensure that our efforts are more concentrated, with more sharing of human and financial resources.

9. We Must Press for Aboriginal Language Legislation.

It is the position of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada that the protection and use of our languages is an inherent right, a treaty right, a constitutional right, an Aboriginal right, and a human right. There is both a legal and a moral obligation for the Government of Canada to recognize our language rights. There are precedents for legislation to protect and maintain indigenous languages.

The First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres has proposed an Aboriginal Languages Act with a provision for an Aboriginal Languages Foundation. The Act would bring into law the recognition of the rights and freedoms of Aboriginal peoples to protect, revitalize, maintain, and use their languages. The Act would include a provision for the appropriation of funds through the establishment of an incorporated, endowed Aboriginal Languages Foundation (Kirkness, 1998).

The legal right to the protection and restoration of our languages must be accompanied by the effective right. The effective right means access to the knowledge, strategies, and resources necessary to rebuild and revive our languages. The legal right without the effective right is of little value (Reyhner, 1996). In other words, the government must commit substantial funding to the Foundation to enable us to develop and control the processes, resources, and activities needed to protect, preserve, promote, and practice our languages.

10. We Must Work Together.

To accomplish the previous nine suggestions of how we might save our languages, we must work together, whether it be as a family, a community, or on a national level. We must take stock of where we stand in respect to our languages. If we are "for saving our languages," then we must assess what each of us is prepared to do about it. Is it going to be a family effort? How can our commitment and passion become a community effort? Are we willing to help to get the language families together to make long range decisions about the languages? How are we going to ensure that the political will of government and of our political leadership coincide for the benefit of all our languages?

We do not have any time to lose. We, as Indigenous/Aboriginal people, must get behind the work that has been done over the last 25 years and support and accelerate these efforts in a coordinated way. We must engage in a common strategy to make our languages living and vibrant once again. When this happens, we will be following the "natural order of the Creator," and we can expect a better life for ourselves and for future generations.

I would like to leave you with the words of the Maliseet Honour Code written by Imelda Perley, who presents us all with the ultimate challenge:

Grandmothers And Grandfathers
Thank You For Our Language
That You Have Saved For Us.
It Is Now Our Turn To Save It
For The Ones Who Are Not Yet Born.

May That Be The Truth

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